The Routledge Handbook of Placemaking

Cara Courage, Tom Borrup, Maria Rosario Jackson, Kylie Legge, Anita McKeown, Louise Platt, Jason Schupbach

Placemaking as an economic engine for all

Publication details

https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780429270482-4

James F. Lima, Andrew J. Jones
Published online on: 31 Dec 2020

How to cite :- James F. Lima, Andrew J. Jones. 31 Dec 2020, Placemaking as an economic engine for all from: The Routledge Handbook of Placemaking Routledge
Accessed on: 30 Dec 2023
https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780429270482-4

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Introduction
As recently as a few decades ago, America’s cities were being drained of residents and businesses. Yet, in 2020, demand for proximity to urban centers was approaching one of the highest points in recent memory, before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The proliferation of desirable urban ‘places,’ or high-amenity districts that are designed, activated, and managed in a way that cultivates a connection between people and the physical space around them, is among the most compelling explanations for this extraordinary turnaround. Cities, and the open space assets that typically anchor them, attract concentrations of workers, firms, residents, students, visitors, and capital investment, generating value for and enhancing the economic competitiveness of their host communities. As a result, cities and governments, developers and corporations, and anchor institutions and nonprofits alike are increasingly turning to placemaking as an effective strategy to drive economic growth, productivity, and innovation. While cities will always face challenges and crises that threaten to reverse the social and economic progress they have made, placemaking will have an important role to play in inclusive strategies to achieve more resilient communities and economies.

How we got here
Beginning in the early 1900s in the United States, more than six million African Americans migrated northward to escape persecution wrought by the ‘Jim Crow’ laws that governed much of the American South, which harshly enforced racial segregation and denied non-white individuals basic civil rights. They largely settled in the industrial cities of the Northeast and Upper Midwest, which had been predominantly white until that point (Boustan, 2010). These white populations expressed discomfort with the influx of people of color and employed a number of strategies to maintain a similar degree of segregation experienced in the South, such as housing discrimination and exclusionary zoning. The practices then became codified, setting in motion a reconfiguration of American socioeconomic geography that would result in people of color living in city centers and whites living in suburban rings on the periphery of metro areas. It is no coincidence that the cities who witnessed the largest in-migration of nonwhites between 1940 and 1970 also lost the greatest share of their white population (Boustan, 2010).
The segregation of and ‘divestment’ from city centers were intensified by federal housing and transportation policy. In 1934, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) was established to insure and regulate the terms of mortgages for single-family homes and multifamily development projects. However, the FHA’s Underwriting Manual only permitted these benefits to be extended to geographies deemed ‘best’ or ‘still desirable’ by the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation (HOLC), which almost exclusively consisted of white, exurban communities. This federal housing policy encouraged residents and real estate capital to leave cities, ushering in an era of racially charged suburbanization that would degrade urban neighborhoods throughout the twentieth century (Massey and Denton, 2003).

In 1956, construction began on the Interstate Highway System, a 42,500-mile network of roadways that would link cities across the United States (Mohl, 2001). The building of these roads throughout the 1950s not only razed many urban neighborhoods but enabled centrally located manufacturing companies to defect to greenfield sites in the suburbs and in Sun Belt cities. This decentralization shifted hundreds of thousands of middle-class (and white collar) jobs out of the hubs of the Northeast and Upper Midwest, exacerbating urban exodus and leaving behind an ‘underclass’ of residents lacking economic opportunity (Sugrue, 2005). Between 1947 and 1972, the central cities of the 33 most populous metropolitan areas lost approximately 880,000 manufacturing jobs and 867,000 retail-wholesale jobs (Wilson, 2012).

The outcome of these mid-twentieth-century structural changes in the American society and economy left many cities in disarray. Between 1950 and 1990, 18 of the nation’s 25 largest cities suffered a population loss (Lewyn, 1996). And while in the 1950s to 1980s, many American cities sought ways to combine available federal, State and local funding through ‘urban renewal’ efforts focused on high-density housing, these often large-scale, heavy-handed approaches to rebuilding the inner city often cleared out entire neighborhoods and only sometimes succeeded in rebuilding suitable replacement housing, new industry, and neighborhood amenities. Meanwhile, as cities lost residents and property values declined, local tax bases shrank and cities found themselves unable to fund critical municipal services such as public education and police protection, maintain vital infrastructure, or provide support to their increasingly distressed populations (Dreier, 1993).

Rebuilding the strength of urban settlements through innovative, multi-pronged investment strategies

To remediate blight and revitalize inner cities across the country, the federal government changed course, launching two ambitious initiatives in the 1990s: the HOPE VI and Empowerment Zone programs. HOPE VI distributed billions of dollars in block grants to fund the development of transit-accessible, mixed-income housing in dense, pedestrian-friendly districts. For every $1 of HOPE IV funds contributed to a given project, $1.30 in private sector funding was also deployed (US Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2016). The Empowerment Zone (EZ) Program offered grants, low-cost loans, and sizable tax incentives for businesses hiring locally and making capital investments in designated economically distressed communities (US Government Accountability Office, 2010). Both of these programs were innovative in their use of public–private partnerships to finance economic development, setting a precedent for future urban revitalization initiatives.

Local stakeholders, both public and private, sought to build on the momentum of these federally driven investments and their understanding of the intrinsic economic and social value of density. They began forming entities that could funnel capital into catalytic projects in central business districts and brownfield sites along post-industrial waterfronts. Some of these
endeavors took the form of economic development corporations (EDCs), quasi-public non-profits charged with making strategic investments to enhance the vitality and competitiveness of a city or district. EDCs are typically governed by boards comprised of local business leaders, property owners, and public officials (Strom, 2008). Another option that became increasingly popular throughout the 1990s and 2000s was the business improvement district (BID), a defined geographic area within which business and property owners are required to pay an additional tax in order to fund public infrastructure projects (streetscape improvements, public spaces, etc.). BIDs have similarly mixed boards that ensure public, private, and nonprofit stakeholders are engaged in the development and activation of district assets (Strom, 2008).

Through this often-careful choreography between private and public funds and entities, the resurgent capital flowing back into cities was highly effective at transforming urban spaces into more vibrant, amenity-rich places that attracted businesses and residents, particularly those with a college degree. Between 2000 and 2010, America’s largest metro areas saw a collective population growth rate of more than 13 per cent within two miles of city hall, a proxy for ‘downtown’ (US Census Bureau, 2012). Over roughly the same period, more college-educated professionals moved downtown than to the suburbs in 39 of the 50 largest US metro areas (US Census Bureau, 2012). Businesses and jobs soon followed. Between 2007 and 2011, jobs grew faster in city centers than in suburbs for the first time in decades (Cortright, 2015).

However, the renewed appeal of cities has had unintended consequences, including the rising cost of living, increasingly strained transit infrastructure, and shrinking amounts of open space per capita. What’s more, the benefits of this urban revival are not equally distributed. Traditionally marginalized communities are disproportionately bearing the brunt of the downsides yielded by this latest wave of urbanization (Hyra, 2014). Placemaking as a strategy is well-positioned to help address these complex issues, creating and sustaining concentrations of economic activity in an equitable and inclusive way (Vey, 2018). It accomplishes this in part through the design and management of inviting urban spaces that are open to all.

**How ‘place’ drives productivity and shifts the geography of innovation**

Critics have pointed to urban density as the cause of a range of social and economic issues, from public health crises to high housing prices. Yet, evidence continues to suggest that density generates far greater benefits than it does harm, cultivating dynamic and diverse communities that are exceptionally productive, sustainable, and livable. Dense places are also often resilient and highly adaptable ones, capable of reinventing themselves and evolving in response to new challenges and circumstances.

The economic value of density in particular has been well documented. America’s densest cities drive a disproportionate share of the country’s job growth (Abel et al., 2011). Regions with dense populations also lead the country in firm birth rates (Armington and Acs, 2002). While density increasingly seems like a prerequisite for a community’s economic success, there is not a deterministic relationship between the two. Economic performance varies greatly between American metro areas with comparable population sizes and densities.

Quality of place offers a compelling answer as to what distinguishes certain high-performing metros from their similarly dense but less competitive counterparts. As Jennifer Vey, Director of the Brookings Institution’s Bass Center for Transformative Placemaking argues, ‘density absent of investments in placemaking may yield few, if any, benefits at all… a relatively compact but poorly designed neighborhood can discourage social interaction, make walking more dangerous, and worsen congestion and localized pollution’ (Vey et al., 2019). Indeed, many of density’s key economic benefits rely on components of placemaking to come to fruition. Research has found
that density drives economic growth by encouraging frequent interactions between workers and firms that allow them to share inputs and collaborate to develop ideas (Abel et al., 2011). If a city or district lacks public spaces and other ‘social infrastructure’ to facilitate these productive connections, however, it could fail to maximize the potential value of its density. Firm agglomeration has been strongly associated with highly productive and competitive markets (Vey et al., 2019). Yet, if a community that contains a significant number of firms is detached from potential consumers through strict zoning and use segregation or limited transit options, the capacity for such a market to develop could be stunted. In fact, this is one of the reasons why startup companies are abandoning suburbs and cities with poor transit infrastructure for those with fast and abundant options (Credit, 2018). Moreover, the majority of high-growth firms that choose to relocate to dense cities with vibrant, accessible communities are doing so because of the critical mass of young, educated workers they contain (Welch and Anderson, 2017). As of 2014, two-thirds of America’s 25- to 34-year-olds with a bachelor’s degree live in the country’s 51 largest metro areas. Since 2000, this demographic’s population has grown twice as fast in city centers than those in other parts of the metro area. These trends even held true for metro areas that experienced a net loss in population such as Cleveland and New Orleans (Cortright, 2014).

This development is a reversal of the geographic and demographic patterns that persisted for the latter half of the twentieth century. As recently as a few decades ago, America’s most high-powered companies wanted to be situated in ‘nerdistans,’ or suburban havens with sprawling corporate campuses (Florida and Hathaway, 2018). These corporate giants were initially drawn to low-density locations by the sizable communities of educated, white-collar workers that had developed there, a product of the urban exodus discussed earlier (Mozingo, 2011). At the time, most Americans considered the suburban lifestyle to be highly desirable. The General Social Survey, which seeks to measure the American population’s subjective sense of wellbeing, consistently found that Americans are happier in low-density communities and small cities (Okulicz-Kozaryn and Valente, 2018).

The ‘millennial’ generation was the first to buck this trend. This cohort, which consists of those entering adulthood between 2000 and 2014, reported that they were most happy in places with a population of more than 250,000 people and least happy in places with fewer than 8,000 (Okulicz-Kozaryn and Valente, 2018). Multiple arguments have been offered to explain this phenomenon. Some posit that millennials’ student-loan debt burdens prevent them from pursuing the traditional route of purchasing a home and a car, forcing them to live in places where they can rent and ride public transit (Winters and Tabit, 2019). Yet, this theory implies that upon attaining financial stability, millennials will exit the city, which has largely not been the case (Lee et al., 2019). Others argue that the millennial penchant for an urban lifestyle is a counterreaction to the ‘separatist geography’ of the suburbs, where they had little ability to walk or bike places on their own (Wyckoff et al., 2015). Recent analysis found that proximity to consumption, entertainment, and cultural amenities was more strongly associated with millennial urban in-migration than any other potential explanatory variable (Lee et al., 2019). Subsequent research has confirmed millennials’ prioritization of quality places containing these elements. Two-thirds of college-educated millennials reported that they will decide where to live first before looking for a job (Wyckoff et al., 2015). The economic importance of this place-driven demographic cannot be overstated. In the digital age, human capital has supplanted physical capital as the primary input for economic growth. Since the early 1980s, the American ‘knowledge’ sector has exploded, adding 1.9 million employees per year on average. Over the same period, other sectors have grown at much slower rates, averaging 100,000–250,000 new jobs per year (Welch and Anderson, 2017). The impact of this shift has never been more significant than in cities. A one percentage point increase in a metropolitan area’s proportion of residents
with a college degree is associated with a two per cent increase in its GDP per capita (Abel and Gabe, 2011).

Cities have two potential strategies for cultivating a base of skilled workers. The first is to become better at educating their current population through investments in public schools and community college systems. However, this option yields no benefits if these newly educated workers defect to a more appealing place (Cortright, 2014). The more effective alternative in the long term is a placemaking play to become an attractive place for mobile, well-educated workers. While there are talented workers at all age levels, those below the age of 35 are statistically the most likely to move, more than twice as likely as their older counterparts, making them the talent base that is ‘up for grabs’ (Cortright, 2014). This population strongly prefers communities that are bustling with activity, full of places to socialize, provide plenty of housing and transit options, and contain a diverse mix of residents. The demographic shift and population preferences have implications for the locational choice of businesses. Cities that are successful in leveraging placemaking and developing a talent pipeline using such desirable, high-amenity districts tend to subsequently see an influx of new firms. Access to young, high-quality labor is a critical competitive factor for dynamic firms who seek to grow. As a result, it has become a primary motivating factor driving firms’ location decisions (Cortright, 2014). Businesses tend to follow the residential preferences of workers. Just as the decentralization of the population in the mid-twentieth century caused businesses to move to dispersed locations to be closer to potential workers and customers, the re-urbanization of American skilled labor is bringing them back to central business districts (Glaeser and Kahn, 2001). Between 2010 and 2015, nearly 500 firms have relocated to or opened a new office in a central business district, including dozens of Fortune 500 companies. The majority of these companies were moving from suburban locations. Nearly two-thirds of them were in ‘knowledge’ sectors (information, finance or professional, scientific, and technical services). These companies overwhelmingly cited the ability to use the vibrant surrounding neighborhood as a selling point to attract and retain top talent as a main reason for their move (Anderson, 2015).

Not only is a critical mass of young, educated workers a key factor in luring major companies to locate in urban centers, it is also a significant input for catalyzing entrepreneurial activity. The number of firms, especially those in high-tech industries, rises faster in places with an abundant supply of young workers (Ouimet and Zarutskie, 2014). Rates of new-firm birth are of great economic consequence to cities and regions. A 10 per cent increase in a metropolitan area’s startup rate raises overall wages and employment by up to 2 per cent over the following decade (Lee, 2016). What’s more, high rates of entrepreneurship are also associated with more research and development activity (Fazio et al., 2016).

Whether through incumbent relocation, startup creation or both, the introduction of new, innovative firms in the knowledge sector yields positive spillover effects for cities and regions. Economist Enrico Moretti found that for each new high-tech job in a city, five additional jobs are ultimately created in the local service sector. These jobs consist of both skilled occupations and unskilled ones (Moretti, 2013). Moretti argues that the cities who harbor this explosive job creation potential are those with a solid base of human capital that enables them to keep attracting employers in key industrial clusters. Those who are unable to cultivate such a workforce are susceptible to being on the wrong side of what Moretti dubs a ‘great divergence’ in the economic fates of American cities (Moretti, 2013). Cities recognize this critical juncture and are pursuing policies to seed local ‘innovation ecosystems’ that attract talented workers, proliferate high-growth firms, and generate the associated economic gains. Innovation ecosystems have been defined in a number of ways but are most simply described as a collection of stakeholders, assets, and their interactions within an urban environment that result in new technologies.
‘Innovation districts’ are cities’ attempts at engineering these ecosystems through planning and placemaking. They are distinct geographic areas where leading-edge institutions cluster and connect with startups and the organizations that support them to develop new ideas, products, and enterprises (Katz and Wagner, 2014).

However, whether these collaborations occur and the extent to which they are productive is determined by place. If an innovation district’s urban fabric does not promote interactions between individuals, firms, and institutions that spawn, sharpen, and advance ideas, it will likely fail to nurture an ecosystem. By contrast, dense, walkable, and highly connected places foster the open culture of innovation by creating spaces that facilitate idea generation and exchange, the most fundamental input for innovation. Successful innovation districts require the development of public spaces that encourage networking, mixed uses to create a ‘buzzing’ atmosphere, and a variety of options that connect people to the district and within it. These place-based ingredients are so integral to the success of an innovation district that a recent handbook for ‘auditing’ your city’s ‘innovation district’ includes a section on evaluating a district’s ‘quality of place.’ All of an innovation district’s built environment assets should aim to create an ‘experience of proximity’ in which highly visible activity engages, excites, and inspires (Vey et al., 2018).

The majority of the United States’ innovation districts are located in well-established technology hubs such as Seattle and Cambridge, who have transformed neighborhoods such as South Lake Union and Kendall Square into vibrant, thriving spaces that are now home to some of the country’s most innovative and valuable companies (Katz and Wagner, 2014). In recent years, cities across the country have pursued this strategy and enjoyed great success. Chattanooga, once dubbed the ‘dirtiest city in America’ during the fallout of deindustrialization, has had an economic renaissance having redeveloped its riverfront into a high-amenity, mixed-use district and introduced high-speed public broadband, among other initiatives (digital connectivity in particular is poised to become an increasingly critical component of urban places in the twenty-first century). These investments in quality of life paid dividends for Chattanooga, contributing to new residential development downtown and luring young entrepreneurs as well as a new Volkswagen assembly plant to the city, bringing a significant number of new jobs and revenue (Storring and Benz, 2018).

Place-oriented development: how parks and open space enhance real estate value

Parks and open spaces are typically the centerpiece of any economically competitive ‘place.’ They offer a number of benefits to cities and their residents, both quantifiable and not. Previously, parks were seen as nice to have but nonessential investments that improve quality of life, contributing to the health of the population, supporting local biomes, and providing people with a place to gather, regardless of their ability to pay (National Recreation and Park Association, 2018). While there is a sizable body of research providing evidence that parks can also be economic assets with the potential for significant real estate and economic value creation, city officials have only recently started to seriously incorporate parks investments into their overall economic development plans and growth strategies.

The primary impetus for this reevaluation of open space’s economic potential has been the rise of park ‘mega-projects’ that have transformed once sleepy or undesirable districts into must-see cultural attractions. While high-profile projects in major American cities such as New York’s High Line and Chicago’s Millennium Park are among the most well-known examples of this, a number of other, smaller cities have undertaken large-scale initiatives to create public spaces that achieve similar results and become city-defining landmarks. This raises the question of how cities are financing and subsequently justifying the capital expenditures and maintenance costs
associated with such ambitious plans. There are two primary mechanisms through which parks directly generate economic value and revenue for local governments.

The first is the ‘proximity premium,’ or the notion that people are willing to pay more for real estate, primarily residential, within a reasonable distance of a park (100–2,600 feet depending on a variety of factors), which in turn raises assessed property values. This concept is predicated on the ‘hedonic’ model that economists use to try and estimate the impact of particular amenities on the prices of various assets (Harnik and Welle, 2009). The rationale is that cities make investments in a park or public space and proceed to capture a portion of proximity premiums through increases in the assessed value of properties within a certain radius of the park. They then leverage this revenue stream to service bond payments (if the project was debt financed) or directly fund site maintenance, improvements, and even programming in some cases (Crompton, 2005). Yet, not all parks or open spaces provide the same economic benefits and there are several factors that influence the scale of the proximity premium conferred to individual property owners and city governments alike. The bulk of the premium, approximately 75 per cent, is found within a travel distance of 600 feet of the park. Properties adjacent to parks see a premium that is approximately 22 per cent higher than those 2,600 feet away (Miller, 2001). What’s more, the type of open space and its relative location to other amenities within the city are also key determinants of premium size.

‘Natural parks’ or those that dedicate at least 50 per cent of their land area to natural habitat preservation have been found to deliver the largest proximity premium. Specialty parks (those with a single, primary use such as boating or golf) and standard urban parks also have a significant positive impact on property values. While there are perceived negative externalities associated with having a home adjacent to or nearby to each of these types of parks (noise, foot traffic, etc.) studies have found that none of these are enough to significantly offset premiums (Lutzenhiser and Netusil, 2001). Open space siting is also consequential. The characteristics and demographics of a park’s surrounding neighborhoods have a measurable impact on proximity premiums. Residents of high-density neighborhoods that are close to a city’s central business district (CBD) place a higher premium on open space proximity than their suburban counterparts. In one study, neighborhoods that were twice as dense also saw proximity premiums that were three times higher than the city’s average (Anderson and West, 2006). Seeing as many placemaking initiatives occur in dense neighborhoods that are close to CBDs, the inclusion of a park or open space component could greatly enhance the project’s economic impact. Evidence from cities across the United States attests to the findings of this research. In 2001, Indianapolis designated five neighborhoods near the city’s core as cultural districts and proposed the development of a trail to link all of the districts’ assets and provide a venue for public art. Between 2008 and 2014 (the period of the trail’s construction), the total assessed value of properties within 500 feet of these new public spaces increased by 148 per cent (Majors and Burow, 2019). Dallas’ park system enhanced the value of existing real estate within a 750-foot radius by $119 million aggregately. Downtown parks, including recent Dallas investments such as Klyde Warren Park and Katy Trail, drove a sizable portion of this premium (HR&A Advisors, 2016).

Parks are both a value-adding amenity and a critical piece of loss-mitigation infrastructure protecting economic, cultural, and civic assets from climate risk. For example, it is now an imperative for parks commissioners to focus on the range of existential threats from climate change, from flooding to urban heat island effects. With respect to sea level rise and other flood risk due to climate change, public waterfront parks are increasingly seen as the first line of defense. Unlike previous strategies for mitigating flooding such as levees, which have created a sharp urban edge or divided communities, parks are being reimagined in cities as a new form of resilience infrastructure with an overlay of ‘social infrastructure’ informed by
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community engagement. Plans for the 10-mile ‘BIG U’ integrated flood protection system for Lower Manhattan, with which our firm has been associated since its inception, provide more intensive and varied community programming, and stronger connections to the water’s edge and upland communities, while insulating one of New York City’s most flood-vulnerable and economically and socially diverse string of neighborhoods from sea-level rise, storm surges, and other impacts of climate change (Rebuild by Design, 2019). If executed true to its vision, the BIG U can become exemplary of the notion of ‘hedonistic sustainability’ or the idea that communities can become more climate resilient and improve the quality of life for residents simultaneously (Ingels, 2012).

The second primary mechanism through which parks and open spaces create economic value for cities is induced new development. Real estate developers are increasingly recognizing the opportunities for asset value enhancement that parks provide as well as the increased foot traffic parks generate for commercial operations. They are shifting the geographic focus of their development activity to park-proximate neighborhoods and increasingly are willing to fund some or all of the cost of building new parks (Norris and Singh, 2018). Since 2000, Pittsburgh has invested approximately $130 million in the city’s riverfront parks. This has helped to catalyze $2.6 billion in private riverfront development activity, a 20:1 return on investment ratio (Riverlife, 2015). Even smaller cities like Greenville, South Carolina are seeing outsized returns on open space investments. The city’s $13.5 million investment in Falls Park downtown has yielded nearly $600 million in nearby development between 2004 to 2015 (White, 2015). Developers are also beginning to invest in publicly accessible open spaces themselves. As municipal budgets have tightened, the public resources available for open-space creation, operations, programming, and improvements have flatlined or even diminished many cities. This disinvestment restricted neighborhoods’ access to open space and denied many communities the benefits they bring about (National Recreation and Park Association, 2018). Developers have helped resolve this funding gap by directly investing in open-space projects or making financial contributions to park stewardship intermediaries such as conservancies or business improvement districts. Not only do these investments help to transform underused public assets into vibrant community spaces, they also help provide economic returns to the developers as well (Norris and Singh, 2018). While many cities and neighborhoods welcome the infusion of capital and long-term partnership that developers offer, others are wary of the private sector encroaching on the public realm.

Pre-emptive efforts to keep places open and accessible

The notion that a series of place-based investments will transform a neighborhood into a vibrant district that can attract young, educated workers, bring new business activity, and increase property values raises the specter of gentrification for city officials and community members alike. Such concern is not unfounded. However, placemaking is an economic development strategy that has a resolute focus on inclusion. Placemaking seeks to ‘shape the public realm in order to maximize shared value’ while ‘paying particular attention to the physical, cultural, and social identities that define a place and support its ongoing evolution’ (PPS, 2007). Yet, policymakers are often unaware of how they can preemptively address concerns regarding gentrification and incorporate principles of equity into placemaking project design and implementation processes. This section surveys the most promising policies cities are pursuing to anticipate and prevent place and open-space-driven gentrification, dubbed ‘Parks Related Anti-Displacement Strategies’ or ‘PRADS’ by a recent study (Rigolon and Nemeth, 2019). As renewed urban challenges underscore the inequities that exist in American communities, it has become all the
more imperative that the voices of marginalized residents are amplified and that their needs are prioritized through inclusive placemaking initiatives.

Proactive, community-oriented housing policies are one strategy to quell displacement pressures and preserve community character while facilitating growth. Community Land Trusts (CLTs) have emerged as a promising solution to offset unintended negative impacts of revitalization and investment on neighborhood housing markets. CLTs are nonprofit organizations that provide affordable housing in perpetuity through their ownership of land in a given community, leasing it to low-income families. This model seeks to provide long-term affordability and stability in communities by offering housing options that are not subject to real estate speculation and keep monthly costs at an affordable rate due to the lack of profit incentives. What’s more, CLTs create opportunities for wealth building by including a ‘resale formula’ clause in the contract. This grants families exiting the trust a payout that is a portion of the increased value of the property they leased (the remainder is kept by the trust to help preserve long-term affordability) (Choi et al., 2017). Cities have also recently begun utilizing tax increment financing (TIF) districts to fund affordable housing projects. Traditionally, a city designates a group of contiguous parcels as a TIF district and subsequently earmarks property tax revenue from increases in their assessed value to finance a public infrastructure project nearby, whether directly or by servicing bond payments. In addition to leveraging these funds for typical TIF projects, policymakers are now also designating TIF funds for the development, rehabilitation, and preservation of affordable housing (Dye and Merriman, 2006). In 2017 alone, Chicago’s TIF districts generated $660 million in funds, a substantial base of funds that the city can use to address its growing housing shortage (Office of the Cook County Clerk, 2018). If a city were to establish a TIF district that encapsulates all of the parcels within the radius of a park, open space, or placemaking investment, it could capture a portion of the proximity premium and use these funds to maintain affordability for the neighborhood’s existing residents.

Preserving access to places also means taking measures to ensure that they feel welcome to people from all walks of life. A major component of this is placing community input at the center of planning processes. Washington, DC recently launched an ambitious plan to build the district’s first elevated park atop Anacostia’s 11th Street Bridge, linking the traditionally low-income, African American neighborhood to Washington’s Navy Yard, one of the city’s fastest-growing areas. To address concerns regarding gentrification, Mayor Muriel Bowser and other leaders engaged the Anacostia community in a year-long process to draft an ‘equitable development plan’ that would use their feedback to drive the conceptualization and design of the park. This led to a number of parallel initiatives to create and preserve Anacostia’s affordable housing, celebrate the neighborhood’s culture and heritage, and mandate that the construction and operation of the park employs as many community members as possible (Bernard and Kratz, 2018). Governance and stewardship organizations are another critical component that helps protect and promote community voice in decisions concerning open-space assets. For example, while there is an evolving set of models for the improvement, programming, and maintenance of cities’ parks ranging from park conservancies to community development corporations (CDCs), they vary in the extent to which they address equity considerations through their institutional structure. Our firm’s 2018 study with The Trust for Public Land found that the park alliance model is most conducive to community involvement. This equity orientation is due to its flat and representative structure that allows for shared decision-making authority between the city and the community on all aspects of park stewardship (Trust for Public Land and JLP+D, 2018).

In order to sustain inclusivity throughout the course of a placemaking initiative, planners, policymakers, and other stakeholders must take dedicated measures to engage and listen to
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Through targeted, partnership-driven investments in place, cities across the United States have achieved a positive turnaround of their social and economic fortunes, transforming previously empty or underutilized swaths of land into amenity-rich districts anchored by inviting, value-generating open spaces. These revived and well-connected urban destinations have become a magnet for young, talented workers and firms that leverage their built environments to facilitate and accelerate economic and innovation activity. This experience offers lessons for how cities can recover from future crises and resolve persistent challenges through placemaking initiatives that prioritize inclusion, social connectivity, and ingenuity.

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Further reading in this volume

Chapter 15: Un/safety as placemaking: disabled people’s socio-spatial negotiation of fear of violent crime
Claire Edwards

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